

Lunchbox Lowdown

BY LISA DRAYER, MA, RD

As a nutritionist and mother, I'm the first to admit that packing lunch for your kids can be a daunting task, especially when you consider all the requirements to satisfy: lunches should be tasty, nutritious, and convenient, and of course, they have to be good cold.

So what's a mom, dad, or caregiver to pack for lunch? A few simple guidelines will go a long way toward creating satisfying school lunch options:

- ▶ **Taste-test it at home.** If your children have never eaten egg salad or haven't tried that honey mustard dressing you just brought home, don't send it in their lunch bags. Let them taste everything at home first. Better to know ahead of time that they'll enjoy what you're packing.
- ▶ **Make it fun.** School lunch is a terrific opportunity to be creative and discover new ways to eat and present food. Try turning sandwiches into animals with special cutters and packing items in fun containers. Adding personal notes to your children's lunch bags will also make them smile.
- ▶ **Involve your kids in meal preparation.** There's no better way to ensure that your children will enjoy their lunch! Brainstorm together, then head to the supermarket and ask them to pick out breads and

rolls, spreads, vegetables, and fruits. I love making lunches with my daughter each night because it gives her a sense of accomplishment. Plus, it's a great way to encourage healthy eating: kids are more likely to eat nutritious foods if they played a role in preparing them.

- ▶ **Be mindful of nutrition.** Children need protein for growth and focus at school, healthy carbohydrates for sustained energy, healthy fats for brain development, and calcium-rich foods for strong bones and teeth. A lunch should include approximately one-third of a child's daily nutrient requirements. An easy way to help ensure this is to include a sandwich (or some other combination of protein, grains, and healthy fats) in each lunch, along with a fruit or vegetable and a dairy snack.
- ▶ **Plan and pack ahead of time.** Designate a time during the weekend when you can plan ahead for the week's lunches. You can design a weekly "lunch menu" and post it on the refrigerator, but if this seems too rigid, at least plan to get your lunch staples in the kitchen before the week begins so you have options. Pack up lunches the night before to ease the morning rush. In our home, making and packing lunches is the start of the evening bedtime routine.

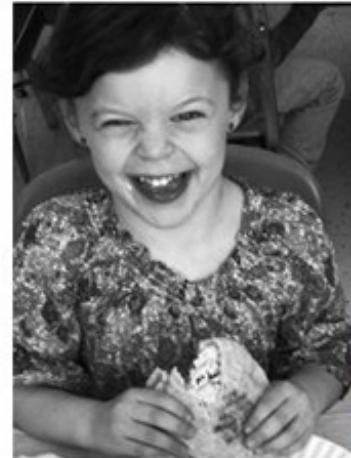
TRIPLE-BERRY SMOOTHIE (from *The Beauty Diet*)

- 2 cups halved strawberries
- 1/2 cup raspberries
- 1/2 cup blueberries
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1/2 teaspoon grated fresh lemon zest
- 1 cup low-fat plain yogurt

Combine all the ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. Yield: 4 servings (approximately 1 cup each)

Note: During the winter months, stock up on frozen berries, which are just as nutritious as the fresh ones!

Per serving: 116 calories; 4g protein; 24g carbohydrates; 3g fiber; 18g sugars; 1g fat; 0.6g saturated fat; 0 trans fat; 3.7mg cholesterol; 44mg sodium; 129mg calcium; 0.1g omega-3 fats; 51IU vitamin A; 54mg vitamin C; 0.4mg vitamin E; 0.5mg iron; 0.7mg zinc



Yellow Roomer Brooke Strumeyer, daughter of nutritionist Lisa Drayer, enjoys a healthy lunch at school.

PHOTO: DENA WARREN

Lisa's Lunches

"Bagel Snake" No need to fear this edible snake! Slice a mini-bagel, then cut each slice in half for a total of four semicircles. Top each part with tuna salad (use canned chunk-light tuna). Wrap each of the four parts in plastic wrap. Pack two blueberries for the eyes, and a carrot or red pepper strip for a tongue. Your child can assemble the open-faced sandwich in class by connecting each of the bagel parts. Pack more blueberries with some yogurt for dipping.

— continues on page 12 —

"Wheels on the Bus" Wheel pasta always goes over big in my house, especially during play dates. Combine wheel (rotelle) pasta with cooked peas and carrots, plus some canned chickpeas. Toss with a sweet Vidalia onion dressing, or any dressing your child likes. Add a yogurt parfait: in a clear cup, combine plain Greek yogurt with strawberry halves or pineapple chunks and your child's favorite cereal; cover with plastic wrap and foil.

"Turkey Pinwheels" These are fun and easy to make with your kids. Spread a thin layer of cream cheese on the entire surface a large tortilla (try spinach, tomato, and whole wheat varieties). Place spinach leaves on top. Add one slice of Swiss cheese and one slice of turkey (leave a little room before reaching the edge of the tortilla). Roll it up; then cut into small pieces. Complete the lunch with apple slices or apple chips and a smoothie (I like Stonyfield's YoKids line). Note: sprinkle lemon juice on top of apple slices to preserve their color.

"Lunch on a Stick" Have fun creating various "kebabs" with bamboo sticks or straws. Try fruit kebabs: alternate pineapple chunks, blueberries, strawberry halves, honeydew, and cantaloupe chunks. Or, try cheese and tomato kebabs: alternate cherry tomatoes with mozzarella balls (bocconcini). Or hummus rollups: spread hummus onto a mini wrap, then roll it up, cut into small pieces, and thread them on the stick.

"Butterfly Sandwich" This is a great use of rotisserie chicken from last night's dinner. Cut up some chicken and mix with diced apple and a small amount of mayonnaise. Using a butterfly or other sandwich cutter (there are lots of great ones to choose from!), cut out shapes from two slices of whole wheat bread, then place a small amount of chicken salad in between. Add chocolate-dipped pear slices (to make these, melt some chocolate chips in the microwave with a bit of canola oil, dip the slices in the melted chocolate, and refrigerate on wax paper) and a string cheese.

"Egg Face" It's so much fun to make faces with foods! Spread two slices of whole wheat bread with hummus, tuna salad, chicken salad, or egg salad. To make eyes, slice a hard-boiled egg into 4 pieces. Place olives, peas, or cherry tomatoes on top of the egg slices for the pupils and add one for a nose. A slice of tomato or red bell pepper can serve as the lips. You can also add shredded lettuce or carrot for hair. Serve with "ants on a log": Spread hummus or cream cheese on celery slices, then top with raisins. Add a banana or some grapes and low-fat chocolate milk.

As far as beverages go, I always recommend low-fat milk and water. Including milk or a smoothie will help boost your child's dairy intake, especially if the lunch doesn't contain cheese or yogurt. If your child likes juice, I recommend a low-calorie version, like Honest Kids' line of drinks, which have less sugar than other beverages. ■